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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews research on the relationship between learning disabilities (LD) and juvenile delinquency (JD) and reports preliminary results of a study to determine the importance of social class indicators to the LD/JD relationship. Studies investigating rationales of school failure, and susceptibility (of certain behaviors and personality characteristics) are examined, and quantitative and observational studies are discussed. Data on social class indicators related to school achievement and delinquency are analyzed. Reported is a study involving 19 LD high school students and 30 nondisabled students. Results indicated no significant difference between the LD/JD and LD/non JD Ss, suggesting that the two groups are similar in social class. However, significant differences were observed when regular students were compared to LD Ss and to JD Ss. Differences found in occupation, education, and income suggested that the social class status of regular students was not similar to that of other groups. (CL)

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING DISABILITIES AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING DISABILITIES AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to review the research literature that investigates the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency, and 2) to report the preliminary results of a study conducted by the authors to determine the importance of social class indicators to the learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship.

Introduction

At the onset it is important to note that previous research on the learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship has been seriously hampered by the absence of a common operational definition of learning disability. Compton (1974) defined learning disabilities as anything which prevents a child from achieving in the classroom. Studies conducted under the authority of the Comptroller General (1977) defined learning disability as having to do with perceptual integration, and verbal and nonverbal expression. Berman (1976) did not attempt to define learning disability.

Identifying the learning disabled child is also a variable that needs stricter control. There is no universally accepted measurement for learning disability. The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, (Wechsler 1974), is the only instrument common to most of the studies done to date, but the use of the test results shows a wide variance.

The effect these two problems have on research efforts is summarized in a report issued by the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (1976):

> *When one of the critical variables (LD) has no objective operational definition and no objective metrics for measuring the degree of its presence or absence, the technical aspects of instrumentation, testing procedure, and data analysis become critical factors in assessing not just the precision of conclusions, but whether they mean anything at all.*

The first problem could be solved if all the professions concerned with the learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship would adopt a common definition. Recent federal legislation requiring education for all handicapped children has provided such a definition.

> *"Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain disfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.* (Federal Register 1977)

The problem in identifying the learning disabled child might not be solved so readily. The same federal legislation that provided a very specific definition of learning disability only provided general parameters for identifying the condition. An objective measurement criteria will be needed before appropriate research can be designed and conducted.

A relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency implies that because a child is handicapped by a learning disability this could ultimately result in delinquent behavior. Two theoretical positions regarding this causal relationship, the school failure rationale and the susceptibility rationale, are examined. Because research using statistical analysis creates the validity questions mentioned earlier

some researchers have relied on quantitative and observational data. Studies, often cited in defense of the learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship, are reviewed. Of the many factors believed to influence school achievement and/or juvenile delinquency socio-economic variables probably head the list. Various studies citing the effect of socioeconomic variables are noted. Using the socioeconomic factors as a beginning point, a study investigating social class indicators and the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency is reported.

The School Failure Rationale

An unrecognized learning disability is the catalyst for school failure, dropout, and juvenile delinquency according to the school failure rationale. It refers to three immediate effects of the learning disability: adults perceive the child as a disciplinary problem, the child is handicapped in achieving academically, and he is ridiculed by his social peers, (Murray 1976). Berman (1975) has graphically described this sequence.

> *The cycle begins with early problems at home. The child was showing perceptual and attention problems even prior to school, but the behavior was written off as "ornery" or "uncooperative" personality. The child enters the early grades of school already accustomed to the fact that he won't be able to do things as well as expected of him, that he will fail and be humiliated continually. This prophecy is fulfilled in school as teachers, considering the child "a behavior problem", punish and ridicule him for failures or for behaviors that he cannot control. The child begins to think of himself as a loser, as someone who can never hope to live up to what people expect of him. . .Eventually he's suspended, drops out or is thrown out of school to roam the streets, and the inevitable road to delinquency is well under way.*

Berman is supported in his description by other professionals and practitioners in the field, (Jacobson 1974, Mulligan 1974). Jacobson indicated that, *"delinquent behavior grows from schoolroom frustrations experienced by the child. . . who is handicapped by a learning disability."*

The emotional and psychological impact that labeling may have on a child and the response it elicits from adults and peers is another important factor in the school failure rationale. Grouping children who have behavioral problems may actually contribute to delinquency, (Murray 1976). Sabatino (1973) reported that since delinquency is learned behavior, it follows that children would learn delinquent behavior by association with other children known to have behavioral problems. Research indicates that delinquent behavior is, in fact, greatly influenced by peer association, (Elliott and Voss 1974). Some researchers are convinced that *"labeling's causal role is substantial and proven,"* (Murray 1976). Others question these conclusions and suggest that behaviors which follow labeling are not so much caused by the label as they are predicted by it. A study of long term consequences of labeling did not reveal significant detrimental effects on young adults who were labeled delinquent in school, (Pink and Noblit 1977).

Motivation to commit delinquent acts may come from three possible sources: the need to compensate for continual failure, economic needs brought on by the lack of marketable skills, and the problem of too much idle time subsequent to school dropout, (Murray 1976). The school failure rationale is illustrated in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

The school failure rationale is viewed with skepticism by opponents of the relationship. There is some consensus that learning disabilities may be responsible for school failure, and that academic failure may be responsible for delinquent behavior among a small portion of youth who end up in juvenile courts. However, there are too many other factors which contribute to school failure and/or delinquency. Such factors include psychological attributes, poverty, broken homes, social disadvantagement, cultural alienation, emotional disorders, and socialization by delinquent peers, (Sabatino 1973, Murray 1976, and Herbert 1978).

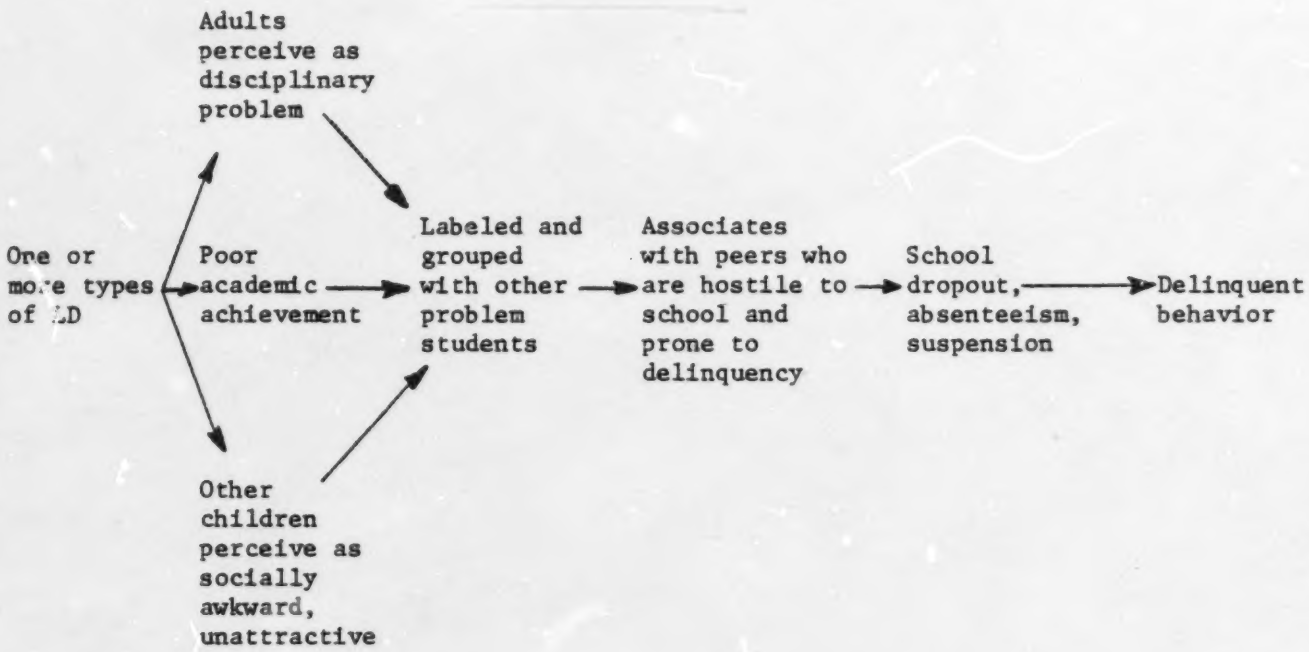
The school failure rationale implies that school dropout is a key event in producing delinquency. However, Elliott and Voss (1974) demonstrated in a longitudinal study that delinquency rates are higher before dropout. They also found that *"educationally handicapped"* dropouts did not have significantly higher delinquency rates than dropouts who were *"intellectually capable"*.

The Susceptibility Rationale

The susceptibility rationale for the causal relationship of learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency argues that certain behaviors and personality characteristics cause problems for the

Figure 1

The School Failure Rationale Linking LD and Delinquency (Murray 1976)


Adults perceive as disciplinary problem
One or more types of LD
Poor academic achievement
Labeled and grouped with other problem students
Associates with peers who are hostile to school and prone to delinquency
School dropout, absenteeism, suspension
Delinquent behavior
Other children perceive as socially awkward, unattractive

learning disabled child in the classroom and in social relationships. Children with learning disabilities have been described as impulsive, insecure, having poor judgement, and lacking positive personality characteristics, (Miller and Windhauser 1971, Brutten, Richardson, and Mangel 1973, Mauser 1974). Studies by Bryan (1974, 1977) have consistently shown that learning disabled children have difficulty in perceiving social cues and in responding appropriately to those cues.

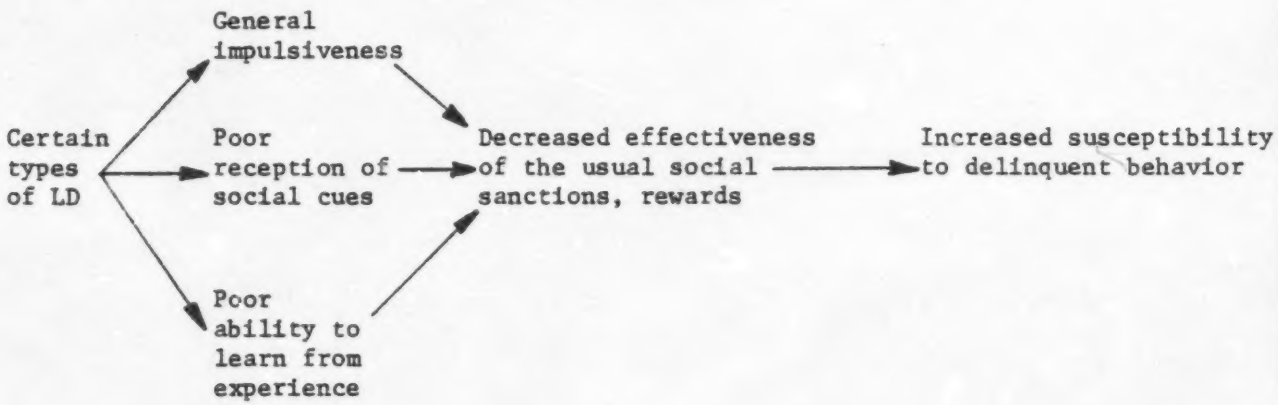
Brutten, et. al. (1973) asks, *"Is it reasonable to believe that the behavior traits that mark many learning disabled children. . . if not diagnosed and treated might make these children as incorrigible in society as they are in school?"* According to the susceptibility rationale the personality characteristics of the learning disabled child do contribute to potential delinquency. This progression from learning disability to juvenile delinquency is illustrated in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2

Arguments opposing the susceptibility rationale are based on empirical evidence. If it is true that certain personality characteristics common to learning disabled children make them more susceptible to delinquency, then one would expect a high incidence of the particular personality type in delinquent populations. Research has shown that only a small proportion of delinquent youth have these characteristics, (Sullivan, Grant and Grant 1957, Quay 1972).

Figure 2

The Susceptibility Rationale Linking LD and Delinquency (Murray 1976)


General impulsiveness
Certain types of LD
Poor reception of social cues
Decreased effectiveness of the usual social sanctions, rewards
Increased susceptibility to delinquent behavior
Poor ability to learn from experience

Quantitative and Observational Studies

In discussions of a causal relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency two types of studies have generally been done, quantitative and observational. Considered together these studies offer a substantial case for the existence of a relationship.

Compton (1974) tested 444 adjudicated delinquents for learning disabilities and found that 90 per cent were having special learning problems. The Comptroller General (1977) reported that in prevalence studies conducted by his office, *"Of the 129 juveniles tested in two states, 33 (26%) were found to have primary learning problems."* Berman (1975) conducted a study and found that the discrepancy between verbal and performance intelligence scores as measured by the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, (Wechsler 1974), were significantly greater in the delinquent group compared to the nondelinquent group. He stated that 56 per cent of the delinquent group had deficit adaptive abilities. In subsequent studies (Berman 1976), it was found possible to classify 87 per cent of the delinquent and 78 per cent of the nondelinquent boys on the basis of their neuropsychological profiles. *"It is apparent,"* he said, *"that the level of performance and patterning of the abilities and deficits is markedly different for the two groups."*

Observational data in support of the causal relationship is generally more abundant and credible. Observations and case studies have been recorded by juvenile judges, probation officers, psychologists, educators, medical doctors — all suggesting that the youth they

encounter daily often exhibit specific learning disabilities, (Mulligan 1974, Lewis 1978, Katzman 1978, Drake 1978). Poremba (1975) observed that over 50 per cent of the youth in his sample had indications of minimal brain damage. Mauser (1974) was able through observation of youth in his care to identify many characteristics which were common to both learning disabled and delinquent youth. Though observational data does not make the same case as empirical research, the combined observations of many respected professionals cannot be ignored.

Social Class Indicators Related to School Achievement and Delinquency

Socioeconomic factors are often identified as causes of juvenile delinquency. It has been demonstrated that disproportionate numbers of official delinquents come from lower socioeconomic categories, (Reiss and Rhodes 1961, Gold 1963, Quay 1966). However, a number of studies, relying on the use of self-report delinquency scales, indicate that the relationship varies as a function of the definition of delinquency and of social class, (Nye 1958, Akers 1964).

It is also evident that a relationship exists between some socio-economic factors and school achievement, (Polk and Schaffer 1972). That juvenile delinquents are frequently low achievers in academic areas is generally accepted. Necessarily, a comprehensive study of the learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship would include consideration of socioeconomic influences.

The determination of social class is no simple task. Social class has been traditionally established on the basis of one of three factors: income, occupation, or neighborhood. Cohen (1957), however, argues that assigning social class on the basis of one characteristic alone may

result in error. He states ". . . *many families which are middle class in economic terms and live in what are known as middle-class neighborhoods may be decidedly working class in terms of the experiences they provide their children.*"

A breakdown of social class into specific indicators may be more accurate and thus have more predictive value in school achievement and delinquency. Glueck and Glueck (1962) in an analysis of family environment and delinquency, found that family size, presence and compatability of parents at home, and income level could be used conjunctively in predicting delinquency. Social class indicators identified by West and Farrington (1977) were shown to be extremely accurate in predicting delinquent behavior when at least three occurred simultaneously. These factors included low income, large family size, parental criminality, low intelligence, and poor parental behavior. A study on mental ability test performance (Bradley, Caldwell and Elardo 1977), found that social class indicators were more accurate predictors of success than socioeconomic status alone.

Individual social class indicators have been frequently tested in relation to delinquency and school achievement. Occupation of father and income level have been used historically as obvious indicators of social class, (Blau and Duncan 1967). A relationship between school achievement and job status was noted in the studies of Schroder, Crawford, and Wright (1971). Similarly, Kennet (1972) found the mean intelligence quotient of children from families of professional, semi-professional and managerial status to be significantly higher than the mean intelligence

of children having fathers employed as skilled workers, supervisors, salesmen, and semi- and unskilled workers. Relating occupation to delinquency, Robins (1965) states ". . . *father's having a manual instead of a white collar job was found to be related to official delinquency.*"

The education level of the father has proven to be a reliable predictor of cognitive performance and school achievement, (Thorndike 1973, Schipman 1977) as well as a factor related to the development of delinquency, (Robins 1965). Education may also affect conditions of the home that have been independently associated with school performance and/or delinquency. Items such as child appropriate books or magazines and newspapers are more likely to be found in homes where parents have attained higher levels of education. The quality of newspapers and the number of magazine subscriptions maintained have been demonstrated to be related to academic performance, particularly in older children (Schroder, et. al. 1971, Maynard 1977).

The relationship between family size, juvenile delinquency and low school achievement has been clearly established, (Glueck 1961, West 1967, Thorndike 1973, Kennet 1973, Rutter 1975).

Maynard (1977) reports that the presence of both parents in the home is related to school attendance and performance. Specifically reading and vocabularly skills are noted as being higher. Gold (1963) showed that the presence of two parents contributes to family attractiveness which serves as a control of delinquency.

Other social class indicators cited as significant in relationship to school achievement and delinquency are the use of community services (West 1967, Schipman 1977), family recreation (Glueck and Glueck 1961), and religious preference (West and Farrington 1977).

Summary

This literature review suggests that the question of a causal relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency is unresolved. Both quantitative and observational data indicate that a higher prevalence rate of learning disabilities is found in delinquent samples than would be expected in a normal population. But conclusive evidence that learning disabilities cause juvenile delinquency is not available.

The research reviewed which establishes a relationship between social class indicators, school achievement, and juvenile delinquency confounds the question of a learning disabilities/juvenile delinquency relationship. The simultaneous occurence of all three conditions suggests a complex relationship.

The literature reviewed provides the basis on which to investigate the differences between learning disabled adolescents and learning disabled and delinquent adolescents in relation to selected social class indicators.

SOCIAL CLASS INDICATORS AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING DISABILITIES AND JUVENILE DELINQUENCY

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between learning disabilities and juvenile delinquency. Specifically, it was to determine what differences existed between delinquent and nondelinquent learning disabled youth on selected social class indicators. The social class indicators tested in the study included occupation, education and income levels, presence of both parents in home, music listening preference, family size, frequency and type of family vacation, ownership and value of family dwelling, religious preference, number and type of magazine and newspaper subscription maintained, and participation in school functions.

Method

Subjects

Forty nine high school students ranging in age from 14 to 18 years participated in the study. Nineteen of the subjects were learning disabled and enrolled in a special education program. The remaining 30 subjects were nondisabled students drawn from the regular program. Subjects were assigned to one of four groups on the basis of program placement and delinquent behavior.

Two experimental groups were comprised of learning disabled students, Group 1 (LD/JD) being those identified as delinquent and Group 2 (LD) as nondelinquent. Regular program students comprised Group 3 (JD) and 4 (R), identified as delinquent and nondelinquent respectively.

Procedure

The learning disabled students in the study were diagnosed through the standard public school referral process. Each student received an individual psychological examination and was placed in the special education program on the recommendation of a multidisciplinary team.

Determination of delinquency was based on three procedures. Subjects who had been adjudicated, subjects identified as known delinquents, and those identified by a self-report delinquency scale (Broder, Peters, Zimmerman 1978) were assigned to one of the delinquent groups, 2 (LD/JD) or 3 (JD).

Social class data was provided by parents of the students. Parents were contacted by letter and surveyed with respect to the selected social class indicators.

Results

The chi-square statistic, used in the analysis of the groups, revealed significant differences among the four groups for eight social class indicators. This was accomplished using 4Xn crosstabulation tables. Additionally, seven variables exceeded the acceptable probability of .05. These included: occupation, education, family size, home value, and religious preference, significant at the .01 level. Income and participation in school functions were significant at the .001 level. These results, indicating χ^2 and the degrees of freedom are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1

Table 1 - Across Group Differences

Social Class Indicator	χ^2	Degrees of Freedom
Occupation	18.30	6
Education	14.50	3
Income	22.48	6
Family Size	15.42	6
Home Value	10.54	3
Newspaper	12.10	6
Religion	12.00	3
School Functions	27.24	3

$p < .05$

In order to more clearly define the differences noted in the four-way analysis, the chi-square test of significance was applied using 2 X n crosstabulation tables:

a. Group 1 (LD/JD) to Group 2 (LD)

b. Group 3 (JD) to Group 4 (R)

c. Group 1 (LD/JD) to Group 3 (JD)

d. Group 2 (LD) to Group 4 (R)

Family size was the only social class variable observed to be significant in comparing Groups 1 (LD/JD) and 2 (LD). Comparisons of Groups 3 (JD) and 4 (R) revealed income, religion, and participation in school functions as significant variables. Table 2 summarizes these results. Significant differences were found between Group 1

Insert Table 2

(LD/JD) and 3 (JD) for family size. When Groups 2 (LD) and 4 (R) were compared, five social class indicators were observed as significant: occupation at the .05 level; education, income, and type of newspaper at the .01 level; and participation in school functions at the .001 level of significance. These results are reported in Table 3.

Insert Table 3

Table 2 - Group Differences-Learning Disabilities

Social Class Indicator	Disabled I(LD/JD)-II(LD) χ^2	Degrees of Freedom	Nondisabled III(JD)-IV(R) χ^2	Degrees of Freedom
Income			6.20	2
Family Size	.009[a]			
Religion			3.72	1
School Functions			3.87	1

$p < .05$

[a] fisher's exact test

Table 3 - Group Differences-Delinquency

Social Class Indicator	Delinquent I(LD/JD) - III(JD) χ^2	Degrees of Freedom	Nondelinquent II(LD) - IV(R) χ^2	Degrees of Freedom
Occupation			5.80	2
Education			7.38	1
Income			14.85	2
Family Size	5.81	2		
Newspaper			8.84	2
School Functions			21.50	1

$p < .05$

Discussion

The absence of significant differences between the learning disabled/delinquent and learning disabled/nondelinquent groups suggests that the two groups are similar in social class status. Between learning disabled/delinquent and non-learning disabled/delinquent groups an absence of significant differences is also observed, suggesting that these two groups are similar in social class. From these observations it may be inferred that learning disabled students do not differ from delinquent students in social class status.

In contrast, significant differences were observed when regular students were compared to learning disabled students and to delinquent students. Differences found in occupation, education and income suggest that the social class status of regular students is not similar to that of the other groups.

The present data suggest that socioeconomic class as represented by selected social class indicators is related to learning disabilities and to juvenile delinquency. It further indicates that learning disabled students are more alike in social class status to delinquent students than to regular students. This study supports prior research which indicated a relationship between both, social class and school achievement, and social class and delinquency.

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